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原作 ◆ GAINAX
著 ◆ 菅 浩江

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Houkago no Pleiades - Minato no Hoshizora - Chapter 01-02

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Part 1



Without warning, the world turned white.

In a violent rush the light struck the boy's eyelids, as powerful as a blow.
Blinding, even with his eyes closed.

How bright, he wondered. What could it be?

Both his mind and body felt light, aloof.

Where had this light come from? As he began to think on this, the boy came upon a more pertinent question.

Where was he?

And who... a spasm of pain. Who... am I?

The boy was beset with confusion, adrift without a handhold in an ocean of light.

Timidly, he eased his eyes open. His breath rushed out in awe.

Before his eyes, blindingly bright, shooting stars were falling.

The window by his bed was welling with light as the stars fell, endlessly, brilliant bright arcs across the night sky.

His eyes couldn't bear the brightness any longer and he shut them again, tight.

Was he dreaming, he wondered, or were these meteors real? And who was he, who did not know even his own name?

And as he wondered, the shapeless fog that had filled his mind began to thin.
Ah.... Yes. Now he knew.

Recollection was emerging out of the fog – recollection, or indeed reawakening; and withal his consciousness was reasserting itself.

My name is... Minato, he thought. Nine years old. This is a hospital room. I've

always been here. How could I have forgotten something so obvious?

He suddenly felt that he'd be able to stand the brightness now, after all, and he forced his eyes open. But what had he expected to see? The walls of the ward room greeted him, the same, familiar walls, the only place he'd ever known. The hospital sheets beneath him crinkled softly. At the foot of his bed was a TV, powered off. The ceiling above him was grey, the embedded light undecorated and utilitarian. It had been set to night-light, and now the room was suffused a gentle orange.

Minato climbed down from the bed. Reaching the window, he placed his hands up against the glass and looked upwards at the sky. He could see himself, faintly, in the glass, slim of frame with hair that, on a boy, would be called long.

From a single point in the night sky came the light, streaming out in all directions, to come to fall one by one upon the Earth. Minato gazed at it, transfixed. He almost forgot about the world. For an instant, all he knew was him, and the shooting stars falling.

This, surely, was a dream. There wasn't a meteor shower listed for tonight on the almanac and in any case, such a literal *shower* of light was a physical impossibility. And the dosage of his pills had been measured so that he would not find himself waking at night.

Slowly, the light began to weaken, and at last it faded away entirely.

The view from the window began to assume its usual looks. Hills lay in a low, blackened, distant chain, and high above them hung the multitude of the stars. Right against the upper frame of the window was red Aldebaran, the Eye of Taurus. And there, next to the V that formed the head of the Ox, like jewels nestling in a bed of cotton, were the Pleiades.

But still, something felt off. The boy could not help but wonder.

How did he know what he knew about the stars? He'd spent his whole life in hospital: where could he have learned about them from? He turned these thoughts over and over in his head, until at last another memory re-emerged, and at this he could not hold back a quiet laugh. I really must be confused, he thought, and shook his head to clear it. Of course he knew about the stars. He might not have been able to go to school, but he'd certainly kept up with his

studies. Something really was wrong with him tonight, to forget all this.

Maybe shaking his head had helped, for clarity was returning to his thoughts.

Remember. He loved astronomy, had a complete star chart pinned up on the wall, astronomy books and a small telescope in his bedside cabinet, and even a mini-planetarium his father had brought here for him. His name, too, had come from the stars. Knowing much about them was only natural.

Like at a scene of dominoes, where, rewound, each tile rises after its successor in an unbroken sequence, his memories were returning. Before he'd gone to bed the nurse, Fujiwara-san, had looked in on him, chiding him for being still awake. Before that was dinner, where as usual he'd not managed to finish more than half of the meal. Before that, his mother's sorrowful farewell as she'd left that evening. Before that was his afternoon IV drip, and before *that* was the tasteless lunch that he'd forced down, his mid-morning check-up with Dr. Eguchi, the show at ten with eighth graders cooking, the toast he'd had for breakfast.

Maybe the unchanging rhythms of every passing day were stealing his wits from him. The boy laughed weakly at that, but his smile faded soon again. The reality that he'd never be able to leave this hospital he'd been in all his life loomed over his mind, and drew the laughter from him into a sigh.

Slowly, he raised his head to look once more out of his window.

Really, what had been the light just now? It was too bright to be a meteor shower. Strange, : it felt almost as if it'd given his stagnant existence a shape and definite dimension. As if he had been lit up from an ocean of darkness and impressed in a flash upon reality, as if he'd been lifted out from within the dreary, unchanging earth.

As if the light had come to seek him out, here in a lonely hospital room forgotten by the rest of the world.

Minato had no clue why he had to be hospitalised, owing to the fact that he was only ever conscious when he was feeling relatively well. The nurses were sorry for how he was always sleeping, but as far as he could remember he'd always been

on this bed, reading or playing video games to pass the time.

His parents, well, worried neurotically that he'd feel lonely, and often came to visit. Both of them were busy, but they always took the time to lavish on him the care parents ought to lavish on their sick children. At visiting hours his mother would drop by, however briefly, to rub his head and kiss him lightly on the cheek, and tell him *Sorry I can't be with you for longer*. His father would come on his days off and rather clumsily ask, *Are there any books you want? Anything you'd like to eat?*

The doctors, too, came often. There were so many of them he could barely remember their faces, and the only one that he could remember clearly, the one he liked best, was Dr. Eguchi, who wore glasses, had a soothing voice, and always smiled. Before listening to Minato's heartbeat he'd always put his hands on the stethoscope to warm it.

There were also many nurses, all of them nice and gentle; they were like a bunch of older sisters. Minato especially liked Fujiwara-san. An elegant lady with chestnut hair, she always seemed to have some mascot character peeking out of a pocket from the top of a pen. Whenever Minato showed the inclination for conversation she would always be happy (like a fish biting on a hook) to sit down and chat with him. Fujiwara-san was often praising his parents. "Being able to get whatever you want is a sign that your parents love you very much," she'd say. "Normal kids don't get to watch a lot of TV, but you're allowed to watch it anytime you want for your education. Well, it's not like manga^[1] or variety shows are educational, so it's just as well you happen to prefer learning programmes and documentaries, isn't it? Maybe you don't know this, but your parents have been reading you books while you were asleep! Good stimulation for the brain, to make up for not going to school. If you ever find yourself smarter one day for no good reason, you'd better make sure you thank your parents for it! It's not scientific for me to believe this, but when I hear all the grown up things you say I don't know what else to believe any more."

Something happened once when they were watching television together; Minato could still remember it clearly. The reporter on-screen had been interviewing first graders about their future dreams. These children, at the same age as Minato, looked into the camera with shining eyes and slightly abashed

expressions, and talked about what they wanted to be – professional footballer, patissier, florist, doctor, zookeeper.

Minato had wanted to be an astronaut.

He'd wanted to float through the sea of stars, to feel for himself the grandeur of space. To stretch out his arms at the centre of the vast expanse, and know that the world was much, much more than his bed and his room. Unconsciously, he'd said, "No one asks me what I want to be when I grow up."

He'd spoken innocently, but at his words Fujiwara-san had stiffened; and then, when he turned to her, she was wearing an expression that he'd never seen before. "Sorry," she had whispered, and then run out of the room.

Her apology, he could tell, had been said through tears.

Why did she react like that? was a question Minato began to ask himself. Time, at least, he had for it aplenty. And in the valleys of his thoughts, he found his answer. If his future wasn't something that could be asked about, then perhaps that was because he *had* no future. Whenever he'd asked about when he would be able to leave the hospital, Fujiwara-san would always answer with a "Probably next week." His calendar was marked with many such days, days that invariably had to be postponed to a later date and a later next week. Sometimes he'd say to himself that he wanted to go home, just to try out the feel of the words, but he didn't even have any idea what his home looked like.

That was how it was, wasn't it?

He was never to leave this place. Never to accomplish anything, forever to live out his days in a hospital room. Incapable of speaking like other children about professions, of dreaming like the others of a future.

He'd always considered himself to be in fairly good health, but maybe his sickness was more serious than he'd thought. He'd often felt that his sense of time was a little confused – was that because he'd been spending a lot of time anaesthetised and unconscious?

To have no future, and no hope for tomorrow.

That was how it was.

The boy assessed himself solemnly. For all that he lived in a hospital, he'd always considered himself just an ordinary boy. But he wasn't an ordinary boy, would never leave – never become anything more than what he already was, here and now.

That was how it was.

Though he couldn't remember where he'd heard it from, Minato found himself thinking of the story of the tree in the forest. It went:

“Deep, deep in mountains untrodden by man, there grew a great tree. Many animals made their home in that verdant forest and on that tree, building nests on its branches and taking sustenance of its fruits. Squirrels darted and birds roosted in this tree, and all were beyond the ken of man.

“At last the time came for this elder of the forest. With an immense crack the great tree came falling. The sound of its fall resounded like thunder in the mountains, drawing out a long, lingering echo.

“Now, did any man hear this sound?”

If anyone in a village at the foot of the mountains had heard this sound and recognised it for what it was – a tree falling – then this tree's existence would have become known to man. But what if no one had heard it? If that were the case, the tree, to the humans, might as well not have been there. However loved it might have been by the animals of the forest, however splendid a size it might have grown to, in leading a life apart from humanity it was only destined to pass away, unmarked and unknown.

I am the tree in the forest, thought Minato. My life began here and will spend itself here, forever unknown to the world. As he wouldn't be able to leave the hospital room, his existence to the people outside was no more than a void. No – a non-existence.

And as he thought this he could not help but sigh. However many the books he read or the TV he watched, wouldn't it all come ultimately to nothing? The only good it could serve would be to his own enjoyment, and nothing at all to anyone

else. Even if he managed to advance his knowledge to encyclopaedic levels, there wouldn't be anyone to appreciate it if he didn't leave the hospital. And without being able to be present in person, any ideas or creations of his that were transmitted to the outside world would not be verifiable as not the work of someone else, or even of an AI; nor indeed, his existence as himself verifiable at all.

The boy looked up from his bed at the night sky. With the naked eye it was possible, if conditions were good, to see stars as faint as the sixth magnitude. But in reality, of course, the sky was filled with stars of up to the tenth, twentieth magnitudes, shining away. Shining away with all their might, without a hope of being seen.

He was the same as these stars, he knew.

The boy began to strain his eyes, until his temples began to hurt and his eyes began to hurt, seeking out these stars that could not be seen.

You're there, aren't you?

I may not be able to see you, but you are there, surely.

I of all people would know that.

In the blackness of the Big Dipper's ladle, in the blackness of Libra's scales, in the blackness of Aquarius' pitcher, the boy sought furiously for himself.

From then on, this act became a nightly ritual for him, one he never failed to carry out. And as the days, then nights, months, seasons and eventually years flowed into one another, his sense of time began to disintegrate further to dissolve into the movements of the stars.

Then had come the meteor shower—

He had not been searching for it; rather, it had sought him out. A fierce torrent of light came to encrust his entire being.

And if the light could reach him, then there were no obstructions between them. If the light could be seen by him, then he too could be seen by the light. His life that he'd thought shut up in here had in fact been noticed by the world outside.

You saw who I was. In the silence, with his eyes closed, Minato spoke to the now vanished meteors. *You know that I'm here.*

And eventually, the boy sank back into the darkness of turbid, incoherent time.

His eyes felt light. It came piercing through his eyelids.

Another meteor shower, he thought; but this time seemed different. It had been so long since the meteor shower (Maybe. He was pretty sure). What was the light that had woken him now?

With his eyes still closed, Minato tried to remember what had happened before he'd fallen asleep. Dominoes rose, recollections resurfaced.

Yes. He'd been reading. The book had been a gift from his father, called *Tales of the Constellations*. Its author was a prolific writer on astronomy called Kusaka Akira^[2], and this particular work of his was great as well. The Greek myths, so fundamental to so many constellations, were filled to bursting with daring adventures and the doings of whimsical gods. Gods were supposed to be transcendental beings, forever concerned to great things like the fate of the world, but in the Greek myths if the gods weren't off abducting women then they'd be busy scheming against each other out of jealousy, acting so flawedly and humanly Minato could not help but be amused.

The book had also talked about the stars themselves. There were some difficult parts, but many of its facts and descriptions he'd found extremely interesting: some, like how stars that looked close together in the sky could actually be separated by thousands of light years, or how stars weren't glowing rocks in space but balls of gas lit by nuclear fusion, came as a surprise to him. Jupiter, it'd seemed, had been even just one step short of becoming a star like the sun. Now the fog in his head was clearing. He'd been on the Jupiter page when Fujiwara-san had come by. Gently, with her slender hands, the nurse lifted the book out of Minato's grasp.

"Hey..." But her only response to his protest was a teasing, mock frown. "Time for lights out," she told him. "What if your fever comes back?"

But no. Had this happened today, or yesterday? For an instant the boy was thrown, but the stream of memories quickly reasserted itself. It *had* been tonight. And he'd said in answer, "I'll be fine. It's because everyone makes such a big fuss about me that mum and dad get so worried." How many times had Fujiwara-san said that to him, and how many times had he given the same response?

"Well, you'll be discharged next week, so just put up with it a little longer."

And these lines, too; how often had he heard them? You'll be discharged next week. You'll be discharged next week.

Looking at the mulish set of his eyes, Fujiwara-san's smile faded. "Goodnight, Minato-kun," she said, her tone a little sad.

"Goodnight."

Fujiwara-san turned the lights off and left, and Minato gave a sigh, burrowing into his bed and pulling the covers right up to his mouth, and the silence of the night drew coldly around him.

The boy closed his eyes and began to imagine. What if he could be an astronaut? What if the universe was his to travel?

Well, first of all he'd head for Jupiter and fly right through its Red Spot. Then he'd call on Cygnus' namesake Leda, free Princess Andromeda from her chains, then go for a romp with both the *Canes* and the *Ursae*. He'd play hopscotch with black holes and ride the waves of a super nova, before at last plunging headfirst into the Milky Way – and when he did so, surely a million million stars would rise like foam from the splash, and everything all around would be bedewed as if with diamonds...

Yes.

He'd been deep in his fantasy, and before he knew it had fallen asleep. Until now, when the piercing light had woken him.

He opened his eyes slightly, to his hospital room. The night light burned its familiar dim orange, and the night was cold and dark and unchanged – but no. Something had changed.

There was a light glowing at the foot of his bed. Minato had never seen fireflies before, but he would have thought the light a living creature from the way it waxed and waned like it was drawing breath. Cautiously, he eased himself up. The bedsheets rustled loudly as he did; the light showed no sign of vanishing. He shifted his blankets off his body. His hair, grown long in his days of convalescence, moved lightly against his ears as he squinted at the light.

At that instant, the curtains at the windowed billowed into sudden size.

Minato found that he was shivering. Was it a draught? But the windows were closed at night. A ghost, then... he gathered the sheets tightly around him. Then he heard a voice.

“Oh, found it.”

It sounded quite happy.

From behind the curtains and the window that, really, was supposed to be closed, dropped a boy in flying goggles. He looked about the same age as Minato. He had on a hood modelled after a racer helmet, with a long scarf around his neck, and wore a jumpsuit like the sort worn by explorers, with pants that rounded slightly around his bottom, a little like pantaloons shorts. Most striking about his appearance however was a large, four-pointed star on his chest.

The boy approached the dwindling light with smart clicks of his boots. “I’m on a roll today,” he said, again to himself.

And in a smooth motion he bent down and picked the glow up.

Minato said, “What’s that? Who’re you?”



The boy leaped up in surprise at Minato's voice, and turned slowly around. He asked, his voice shaking a little, "You can see me?"

Minato had to resist the sudden urge to retort with a *You're right there*.

The boy held up the light source and waved it to his right. Curious as to what the boy was doing, Minato's eyes were drawn to movements of the light. The boy waved the light to his left and Minato's eyes followed it too.

"Hmmmm. Looks like you really *can* see me." The boy massaged his brow, looking suddenly a lot less his age. "How uncommon. How truly uncommon." The lines of a detective, for all his explorer's getup. With a world-weary sigh and a lift of his shoulders he hopped up, muttering remonstrations, and squatted froglike on a bedpost. With his goggles up, his face, in the light from the glow in his hands, was somewhat round, his eyes big and bright; and were one to look only at his face he could be mistaken for a girl. The star on his chest was something like a clasp for rucksack straps, and this star he also wore embedded on the thighs of his pants, glinting dully. He grinned at Minato, who had drawn back from his sudden approach. "Well, how do I appear to you?"

What a strange question to ask. "How? Like a boy around my age, like me..." Minato trailed off with the realisation that he could not tell if this *was* really a boy.

The boy did not notice. Bending suddenly closer, he asked, "Do I look cool,

though?”

“Uh, I guess.”

“‘I guess’ doesn’t mean anything. Tell me: do I look cool?”

“Um, yes. Uh...cool.”

The boy hemmed and looked satisfied. “How I look, you see, is totally up to your imagination. Basically, I reflect your inner thoughts. Wouldn’t do if I ended looking bad, see.”

Question marks were launching by the dozen in Minato’s head. What was the boy going on about? First he enters through a closed window, then he picks up some lump of light, acts like I wasn’t supposed to be able to see him, and now he worries about his *looks*? Perhaps seeing Minato’s incomprehension, the boy shifted his place to Minato’s side and, grinning slightly, bent over to look at him until their faces were bare handspans apart. “I guess it can’t be helped if you don’t understand,” he said. “I *am* a first of a kind to this world. I’m an alien.”

“An a-a-a—”

“Do calm down.”

“A-an alien!?”

Minato’s voice had shot up an octave from sheer surprise. His face wavered between amazement and incredulity. “W-well, you certainly did show up under unusual circumstances, I suppose.” He fought to stay rational. “A human kid sneaking into a hospital like you did would also be just plain weird, I’d agree.”

“Don’t call me a kid!” the boy said indignantly. “I’ll have you know that in Earth time I’d be this—this—*this* much older than you! Oh! But don’t start thinking of me as an older person, I’d rather not lose the look I have now.” Though he didn’t seem very old, with his two arms flapping in a panic. Without quite intending, Minato began to smile.

The boy took the smile to be one directed against him, and began to sulk. “Well, fine if you don’t want to believe me. But at least accept that my coming here and being seen by you was not a coincidence, but fate.”

“Fate?”

The boy twisted his body to look at Minato. "Tell me, have you seen a star?"

A star. Minato remembered.

"Oh, yeah. Some time ago... though I'm not sure how long ago that was exactly.... But I saw them, so numerous and bright I thought I must have been dreaming."

"I knew it." The boy bent back to look at the ceiling, kicking his heels. "You had the capacity to see it. Your fate must have been bound at that moment."

"What exactly do you mean by 'fate'?"

"Well." The boy tilted his head even further back at this question. "Nothing more than that our paths are crossed with each other. That we were fortunate enough to meet. By that I mean—well, in human terms, it'd be like going into a park and having a ball fly right into your face, and coming to be friends with the ball's owner because of that. That sort of good fortune."

"That doesn't make much sense to me; I haven't had a friend before," said Minato without thinking.

"Oh?"

Minato saw a glimmer of sympathy light up in the boy's eyes, and added hurriedly, "But I do understand what you're saying. That we're able to influence the course of each other's future."

"That's a smart way to put it. I wonder why, then..." He lapsed into a moment of silence, then spoke again. "Uncommon, indeed uncommon."

"What's uncommon?"

"That a human as old as you can see me - that you still have that innocence. The stars must shine on still in your heart. Even so, to be drawn so to you...." Suddenly his eyebrows shot up. He turned away. "Well, I must go."

"Wait!" Minato reached out and caught hold of the boy's scarf just as he was lifting off. Its owner was jerked backwards onto the bed, making strangled noises. "S-sorry," Minato said, letting go.

"What a violent species you are!" the boy cried.

“Sorry,” said Minato impatiently. “But look, you said that we were bound by fate, right? So tell me everything. What's that light in your hand? And what's so uncommon about me?”

“Some things are better left unknown.”

“All mysteries in the world exist to be solved. Talk.”

“I'm just thinking of your own good—ow! Stop! Stop!” Minato had taken hold of his scarf and was pulling on it hard.

“Tell me!”

“I will, I will! Now let go, let go, let go—” Minato let go and the boy fell to his feet, gulping the air wildly. At length he croaked, “What a fascinating place I've come to. Is this also fate at work?” Setting his scarf resignedly to rights, he sank cross-legged onto the bed—

“Shoes off.”

“Oh, right.”

It was all so very honest. Minato, who'd always been surrounded by adults, was now greatly enjoying being with an equal. It might indeed have been the first time in his life that he'd experienced something like having to hold back his laughter.

The boy fiddled somewhat aimlessly with the goggles on his head. “Where to begin,” he muttered, and made up his mind. “You said that you saw the meteor shower here, right?”

“Yes.”

“There was an explosion on our spaceship. That meteor shower was a part of the spaceship being blown apart, and its pieces falling to the Earth. Right now our engine is broken and leaking all kinds of energy, so we're in a bind.” Minato swallowed. The boy went on. “Normally, it wouldn't be visible to humans. Our ship exists as mass and energy in a state of quantum superposition.” But Minato was blinking furiously from incomprehension now. The boy sighed. “It *is* a difficult concept to get. You know how light has characteristics of both a particle and a wave?”

“Kind of,” Minato answered, after some hesitation. “I've heard of it.” Even though he knew a lot more than most children his age from books and TV, quantum physics was still a branch of science he was more than happy to pass over whenever possible. He knew that light was made up of photons. It had to be, according to Einstein, for the photoelectric effect to make sense. At the same time it was also known that light was a wave, as light shone through two thin slits close together would cross itself to form an interference pattern. Thus it could be seen that light possessed properties of both a particle and a wave. And not just photons: electrons, protons and neutrons would also exhibit properties of a particle or a wave under specific circumstances.

The alien boy went on without regard for Minato. “When light behaves like a particle, it becomes possible to determine its position with certainty. But when it is a particle, its wavelength becomes unmeasurable, and thus its momentum indeterminable. On the other hand, when monitoring a wave, while it is possible to capture a wave as it propagates through a medium, doing so makes it impossible to ascertain the position of the particle of the wave.”

“I d-don't get it...” stammered Minato. Newtonian physics dealt with the workings of visible objects and were essentially common-sensical, but the nanoscale principles of particle physics required more than just an active imagination to grasp. Minato understood at least that particles were both numerous and capable of moving like a wave, but the idea that a particle could actually *be* a wave was a little beyond his comprehension.

“I'd imagine that you don't,” said the boy, looking down and smiling faintly. “Most people would consider this sort of thing to be practically magic.”

“So your ship is a magic ship?” asked Minato.

The boy stared surprised at him for a moment, then broke into laughter. “I like that,” he said. “Yes, just pretend that everything we'd just talked about was just magic.”

It seemed like the difficult explanations were over. Minato felt relieved. Pointing at the boy's hand he asked, “Is that glow also magic, then?”

“It's crystallised potential, if that makes sense to you,” said the boy.

“Crystallised... potential?” Minato tried working that out. He knew what the

word potential meant, and likewise what crystals were. But potential was something abstract and intangible: how could something like it possibly form crystals?

“Do you want to hear about it?”

Minato realised that another incomprehensible explanation was headed his way and felt his throat tightening. But still he nodded. He *was* curious, of course, but more than that: it was simply so much fun being with someone else his age. Whether it was boy or girl, or whether or not they happened to be talking about theoretical physics far over his head didn't matter: just able to be so physically close to another and to talk and laugh over things like healthy people did with their friends was all too exciting for him.

The boy saw his resolve and decided to save him some pain.

“Well, let's ignore their properties and just get down to what they *are*,” he said. “Let's see—” he tapped his cheek with a finger as he thought. “Yes.

“When the explosion happened, debris was blown off; this debris falls into two categories. One is the engine fragments that we need, though unfortunately I'm still not powerful enough to collect them. And the other kind of debris isn't engine parts, but the energy source we power our ship with – this light here.”

“So why is it called crystallised potential?”

The boy turned both of his hands face-up, and moved them like a pair of scales. “They can be matter, or they can be energy—” and here he brought his hands so that they crossed each other, not, and then again, in a pendulating gesture. “Until an observer focuses on one particular property, they're neither matter nor energy. They exist in what is called a superposition of states. A better way of putting it would be so say that they have the *potential* to be both these states.”

“Yes...”

“And in truth humans are not unlike our ship, in that respect. The way fate works for them, see, is quite similar as well.”

Now what! Did he really have to throw a concept as heavy as fate on top of this already confusing explanation?

“The younger humans are, the more they are *not* anything. They waver between their possibilities, yes? These fragments of potential bear a strong affinity for such people that aren't yet anything, and appear to be drawn to them.”

A faint “Oh.” was all Minato could manage for an answer.

Now the boy was making wild gestures as he spoke. “Small children exist in the midst of a whirl of possibilities, ever unsure of what they should do. Maybe they're told to become a doctor when they grow up, but really they want to be nursery school teacher – but also maybe a musician, or maybe a football star. The fragments delight in such uncertainties. And these uncertainties don't just have to be about when they grow up. Maybe they're thinking that they want to eat ice-cream, but ramen seems nice too – oh, but no, tonkatsu's what they really want... and tonkatsu really *is* nice, isn't it? Even before you take the first bite, just having it steaming in front of you and smelling its delicious smell is more than enough to satisfy your... ah—”

There followed a brief moment of hand-rubbing and lip-licking and an exhalation of breath before the boy went on, wearing an earnest, if embarrassed, expression.

“A-anyway, whenever such a child makes a choice, a crystal of potential is released. Ejected from its safety in the ambiguity within the child, you might say. In being not quite matter or energy, they are themselves a certainty out of the possibilities of what they might have been.”

“And is that a good thing or a bad thing?” asked Minato weakly.

He'd thought that making choices was a good thing. But the boy had spoken of indecisiveness as 'safety', as if it were a good state to be in.

The boy huffed definitively through his nostrils. “That depends on the person. On how they take hold of their fate.”

“I see...and what about the released crystal?”

“It disappears.”

“It disappears?”

“It no longer serves any use now that it's been fixed into a certainty. It's just a by-product now.”

“But that's just kind of sad, isn't it? Even indecision can be an important part of a person's life.”

“Well, that also depends on the person. Some people like to look back on the lessons they learned while coming to a decision. Others just want forget about their indecision as fast as they can.”

“So what do you do with this waste once you've collected it?” ask Minato.

The boy made a face at Minato calling it “waste”. Well, *he* was the one who'd called it a by-product. “I never said that it was completely useless,” he said. “With our technology it's possible to consume these unfulfilled futures and every possible event that could have led up to them, as a source of energy. We need these crystals to repair our ship.” As he said this he undid the star-shaped clasp on his chest and put his backpack down. From within he pulled out a drawstring pouch, the contents of which he spilled out onto the bed.

“Oh!” cried Minato. Out of the pouch came beautiful crystals, glittering like pieces of a prismatic rock candy. Crystals of red and blue and all colours in between, catching the light in their facets and reflecting them in a mad multiplicity; and even some large crystals that pulsed while changing colour, like variable stars in the night sky.

The boy added the crystal he had picked up just now to the collection on the bed. This one, unlike the others, was smooth and round and gave off a cold, silver glow, as though a splinter of ice lay at its heart. “Uncommon indeed,” he murmured. “You really ar—”

And then he clamped his mouth shut, as if he'd said too much. Beginning again, he said, “Well, I have to go now. Can't spend all my time chatting with you here.” Scooping up the potential crystals and stuffing them into their bag, he turned to leave...

And Minato caught hold of his scarf, of course. He yanked it backward, hard, drawing an arc quite like a fisherman with his rod, and the alien boy fell back with a squawk onto the bed. “What now?” Tears glistened in the corners of his eyes, and his voice was a pained whisper. “I won't tell you, no matter how—”

“Let—let me help!”

Cried Minato, with all the force in his person.

“I want to help collect your potential crystals!”

His fists were clenched at his chest, his shoulders heaving, a flush on his cheeks. He'd never asked for anything more earnestly in his life.

The boy regarded Minato with surprise. “Well, certainly, you'd be capable...” he said, then suddenly, “No, that wouldn't—”

“Please!”

Taken aback, the boy cast his gaze around the room. At the constellation chart, at the astronomy books, the telescope, the miniature planetarium, the lightless TV.

“Don't you have to sleep?” he asked.

“I'm fine!”

“Hmm,” the boy mused, folding his arms rather deliberately and casting his gaze down. “It's not like our ship can go anywhere before it's fixed anyway. Why, indeed, not dally with the fate that has brought you and I together?”

And even as Minato's face lit up with delight, the boy snapped his fingers.

“Uh?”

And in the next instant Minato discovered, just ever so surreally, that his pyjamas were suddenly in the middle of a transformation. Now in his hand he held a sceptre, its head a star at the centre of a crescent moon. Then a coat of the purest white, with golden four-pointed stars decking its sides. On his front tied itself a big, red bow, a star as big as the clasp on the alien boy marking its centre. Frills peeked shyly out from his cuffs. For bottoms he had a pair of shorts on suspenders, and white calf-highs for socks. Clothes for healthy children that Minato had always wanted to wear.

His appearance in the window glass, when he turned to look, was so very embarrassing that his cheeks burned scarlet. Not only did he have a turned-up collar and epaulettes on his coat, on his head also rode a smart little crown. “I look like the Little Prince!^[3]” he cried. And in all fairness, the pallor of his illness

did give him the look of a sheltered noble. Brushing his hair back from his ears he could see a tiny four-pointed star dangling from each ear. He stood up on the bed and did a quick whirl. His coat flared out, as did the lanyard on his arm; the wind ruffled through his hair, and his earrings touched his cheeks lightly, on either side. He felt lighter than he'd ever been before. Anything seemed possible now, let alone gathering all the pieces of crystallised potential: he felt almost as though he could just reach out and grant his every desire.

“I took it from your imagination. You've got pretty good taste, you have,” said the boy cheerily.

Minato, lifting the hem of his coat a little, asked,

“How do I look?”

“Very cool.”

Quite possibly this was the highest praise to the boy. And Minato himself, feeling a strange warmth in his chest, learned for the first time that he too was capable of embarrassed delight.

“Well,” said the alien. “We do have a problem to deal with before we get going, though.”

“What problem?”

The boy quirked his lips. “I still don't know your name. And I can't just call you 'Hey', can I?”

“Minato,” he said, “My name is Minato. And yours?”

“Ah. About that...” The boy suddenly found the wall rather interesting. “You know, maybe you could give me a name? You're the one responsible for how cool I look, so surely my naming rights go to you as well.”

“Really?”

“I won't take any names that aren't cool though.”

Minato gave an enthusiastic nod and set about thinking. Though nothing really came to mind. In honest truth, in his pantaloons and explorer's outfit the boy looked nothing so much cool as adorable. Seeking inspiration from his looks was clearly a bad idea. He cast about other areas. Stars, constellations, meteors,

aliens...

“That light came from the direction of Taurus, didn't it.” He picked up the book on his drawer – *Tales of the Constellations* – and began to leaf through it. “How about Elnath? It's another name for Beta Taurus.” He pointed it out to the boy, who frowned a little uncertainly.

“Why not Aldebaran, for Alpha Taurus?” he said. “Are you keeping that for yourself?”

“Well...” began Minato. “Aldebaran's kind of long, and you don't really seem like an Aldebaran anyway...” He hedged a little more. “And, well... how do I say this... since I'm Minato, if your name ends with a *-nato*^[4] *as well that'd be...*”

“Like a matching duo?”

Now it was Minato's turn to frown uncertainly. He himself hadn't actually thought so far: all he'd wanted was to share something similar with the boy, the way friends did with each other. He wondered how he would take to it.

The boy in question was grinning from ear to ear. “I like it,” he said. Minato breathed a sigh of relief. Minato and Elnath. Elnath and Minato. It looked like they make a good team and be good friends.

Elnath pulled himself up. “Well, time to go, Minato.”

“Right now?”

“Of course.”

“But it's late, and if I'm not back by morning there'll be trouble,” said Minato.

Elnath looked him seriously in the eye. As silence fell he said, in a low voice, “Time is neither an irreversible nor a linear entity to me. Nor, now, to you.”

I don't understand, thought Minato. But Elnath had already turned to throw open the window, without so much as a word of explanation. He stood with one leg braced on the window frame—

“Let's go.”

—holding his left hand outstretched. Now he was the one who looked like a prince.

“But that's a window.”

Elnath took firm hold of his tentatively outstretched hand. “What if it is?”

And then he leapt, cheerily as his words, out of the window. Minato cried out: “Wa—

And then the night sky suddenly approached at great speed.

And then there were stars, and stars, and stars. The Milky Way spread its vast expanse out overhead, and everything was unlike the vapid glow in the hospital room, illuminated as it was now in the infinite light of the universe. And Minato was flying. The night breeze caressed his cheek gently, ruffling his clothes and hair. Up ahead was Elnath, pantaloons flapping as he flew. Turning, goggles over eyes and a hand holding down his hood, he grinned at Minato. “Good, isn't it?”

Minato looked down. The city beneath seemed like model town, now. Houses became tiny pinpricks of light, and motorcycles drew red trails with their tail-lamps. His heart felt as though it would leap out of his mouth. His blood pounded like it was ready, any minute, to blow. He was filled with so much amazement that he feared it would spill out and over.

I've escaped, Minato thought. From entrapment, from loneliness. From even the gravity that holds everyone on the planet in place. He felt as though a minty fragrance was spreading through his chest, as though his field of vision was widening, as though *Ode to Joy* was playing by his ear. He was the Little Prince, and nothing was impossible for him: everything was possible. Minato felt close to shouting his feelings out.

“Let's go find those crystallised potentials, Minato.”

It was like a summons, from the magician to the chosen prince. Minato had never been so pleased to hear his name.

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1. [↑](#) The raw literally does say 漫画, manga.
 2. [↑](#) Kusaka Akira: 草下旭.
 3. [↑](#) The text gives 星の王子様, the Prince of the Stars, which is Japan's name for the Little Prince.

4. [↑](#) *Elnath, in romanised Japanese, is Erunato.*

Part 2



When it came, it came like a bolt in the blue. Minato shivered at its touch. A little ways above, Elnath called, “What's the matter?”

Minato realised that he was airborne, and stifled a yelp. At the next moment he was abruptly clear-headed again, and wondering dryly what he had panicked for. This was routine by now, them going out to look for potential crystals. How many times had he gone flying out with Elnath to hunt them down? Panicking was a little too anachronistic, now.

All around him the darkness was complete, and he had lost all sense of direction. He felt himself beginning to roll in space: but then the light of the stars caught his gaze, and he knew up again.

Only now did Minato finally feel calm.

Then it came again. That rude awakening, that sting of sensation so very like a sharp smack on tip of the nose. Where, what had it come from? Beneath his eyes stretched the lines of the door lamps, the houses sitting side by side in some quiet neighbourhood. The many windows were lit with a warm glow, like the outpouring of the families' happinesses. There was a girl of early primary years with someone like her father at one household, standing by the concrete doorpost with their backs to the house. The girl was staring straight at Minato's direction with saucer-eyes. As if she were seeing something absolutely strange and wonderful her eyes were shining, and her lips widening in a smile.

Perhaps it was this girl whose attention had shaken him so, with her sight – for lack of a better word – that had pierced him through like an arrow. Something like that.

“Minato?” Elnath came down to Minato's height, peering at his face puzzledly.

And that was it. That was it, of course, what else could it be? What else but him and Elnath looking for the potential crystals together? Now the scenes

began to rise in reverse from this crystal hunt, back to when this first friend of his took hold of his hand and pulled him flying out of the hospital room, as he sought desperately in his memory for confirmation.

His first flight that night could not be said to have gone well. In *Peter Pan* the characters had taken simply and intuitively to the skies, but Minato's first experience was far to the contrary. Floundering and beating his arms and legs was no good – there was no resistance to be felt. He flopped about helplessly in the air.

“You'll get used to it soon,” said Elnath grinning, and did a cheery somersault. “This is your world, Minato. Just relax your body, like normal. Let your body move, flow by itself. You'll find it obeying you soon.”

“T...that doesn't help,” panted Minato, tussling with the air. In all his bed-bound life, flight like in *Peter Pan* was something he hadn't considered even in his dreams. All he knew were nightmares of rising only to fall, of painful, arduous struggle. How was his body supposed to know how to move?

“Oh, all right,” said Elnath, and grabbed Minato's hand. Then they were smoothly rising.

“Remember this feeling well,” he added. And Minato felt again in his heart the mint wind that had been blowing when he had leapt out of the window. So this, he thought, is how release feels.

“Now you just need to focus onto some place, and think firmly that you want to go there,” said Elnath. “Do that, and your body will naturally follow.”

Then just like on a slide, Minato was falling.

“Aaaaahhh!” But the slate roofs of the houses were fast approaching. He tensed his body up against the impact, and reflexively his legs were moving too, to kick hard at the air. He couldn't feel any impact on his soles, but there he was, being propelled back into the air.

“Yep, that's it,” said Elnath. “See? You *can* do it. People really do really do learn best through danger.”

“Don't do that!” Minato said, trying unsuccessfully to scowl. Elnath cackled in response. Then he took off, leaving Minato behind, shouting “Wait!” and trying to catch up. His long scarf billowed behind him as he flew; but after a while he would come to a stop and wait, only to take off again, and then to stop again and throw an eye behind, moving like an inchworm to Minato's slow progress.

A chase – such a simple thing and yet such, such fun!

Playing tag with friends – the chaser chasing with an expression of the most furious of mock angers, and everyone else running off and calling him names in friendship and in glee. A familiar game for those who weren't sickly, an everyday game, mundane.

Having a friend, playing tag. It was the first time Minato had ever been able to go out and play, and what an experience it was!

Now Elnath was swooping through the light spots of the lamps, brushing past TV antennas, somersaulting onto roofs and generally making a ruckus.

“Someone's going to notice us if you make so much noise!” called Minato. Seeing all the people beneath them crowding to get home made Minato nervous.

“It'll be all right,” said Elnath. He approached a salaryman and waved an end of his scarf in front of his face. “See? No one can see us.”

“Very well!” Minato's face stretched into a grin. “Then I won't hold back either!” He swished his coat back, out of his way, and then leapt at full speed at his friend. Elnath shot up hurriedly, barely avoiding his touch, crying “Stop!”

“Well, I did say I wouldn't hold back,” called Minato.

“That's not it,” said Elnath. “I've found one.”

“One what?”

“A potential crystal.” Elnath's eyes, roving frenetically in search, had alighted on a household. Swift as a swallow he dived, to land nimbly in a narrow space between fence and kitchen window. Minato followed suit, narrowly avoiding crashing into a boiler unit, and together they peered into the house.

There was a little girl across an old sink, who looked to be the age when

children begin to talk. She was tugging at her mother, who herself was taking groceries out of a supermarket bag. “I will become one, I will!” said the little girl, her voice high.

“And what'll you become?” The mother spoke very kindly to her, despite being busy and still having a suit from work on. “A giraffe? A panda?”

“Teacher, kindergarten.”

“Oh, so you want to become a kindergarten teacher, Ricchan?”

“Yes! Teacher!” The girl hopped up and down in delight. “I look after children and say bye-bye to them! Fun!”

“Were you playing in groups today?”

“Right.”

“Did you enjoy yourself?”

“Yes.” The girl nodded so hard she seemed about to topple over. At Minato's side, Elnath was rubbing his hands expectantly and said, “It's coming.”

What's coming? But even as he was about to ask, an arrow of light shot out from the girl's chest.

“Now!” Elnath held his right arm high. The light swung by the girl with dizzying speed, then shot itself out at the window, and Elnath caught it deftly. “Score one! Welcome onboard, potential crystal!” Elnath opened his hand: a pink candy-crystal sat at its centre, giving off a faint, gentle glow.

“It's really beautiful,” said Minato, his face bathed pink as he peered in at it.



“It is, isn't it? The younger the child, the clearer the crystal. You know, because they're more innocent.”

After a moment of thought, Minato opened his mouth to ask a question. “Crystals of potential are released by a choice that isn't taken, right? But what choice did the girl not take? Didn't she decide to become a kindergarten teacher? And at her age it's not like saying it will decide her future anyway.” Elnath chuckled at his words.

“Strictly speaking,” he said, “that's not any of my business. But if you really want an answer, well—” and as he spoke he dandled the crystal lightly on his palm “—well maybe you could say that what she had discarded was the choice of not thinking at all. Her mother asked her if she wanted to become a giraffe or a panda, didn't she? She must still have thought that she could become an animal at that time.”

“Oh, so she grew out of her childish innocence and became a little more of an adult?”

“That's one way to put it,” said Elnath. “But put another way—” and then he broke off and said instead, “Well, whatever.”

“Another way what? Elnath, you have this really bad habit of cutting off in the middle of your sentences.” But by then Elnath had already slipped his scarf out of the reach of Minato's grasping hands, and was airborne. “It'll have to stay a

secret,” he called. “Forget about that and let's just collect more potential crystals already!” Minato sighed lightly in defeat, and flew up to join him.

“It's coming.”

“You're not going to have it this time! Not on my watch!”

Lit orange by the setting sun, the two were engaged in a heated aerial battle. They had been charging at each other high above the football goal, but now they curled up and shot off for the school building, whooping wildly as they flew. Coming close up to a second storey window, Minato peered in and regarded the neatly lined desks and the blackboard and the colouring pinnings on the walls with interest. And Elnath, taken with Minato's behaviour, flew circles around him and prodded him, pulled on his coat.

“So you want to go to this... this school place as well?”

“Of course I do. I want to have fun studying and playing together with friends and all.”

“Well, I get the playing,” Elnath observed, assuming a cross-legged and upside-down position in the air. “But you're being stuck in a room, just like farm animals, if farm animals that study.”

“That's only because there're too many students,” Minato shot back, offended at the slight. “This way just maximises efficiency. And anyway, when communications technology becomes more advanced we'll be able to learn wherever and whenever we want.”

Elnath, upside-down and scarf-ends dangling, only looked away. “What mode of learning best suits Earthlings is a question I could hardly care less about,” he said. “But this homogeneous form of education is just ridiculous. You should just learn whatever interests you; what doesn't, you leave to someone else who *is*; and with all your knowledges you can help each other whenever the need arises. Surely that's more efficient for the social creatures you are.”

“I think that's what happens in university anyway, since people branch out and specialise in all kinds of fields,” said Minato. “This is just high school after all, so

they only focus on the foundational knowledge instead.”

Elnath only scratched at the area around his goggles. Now he lowered his body to an angle and moved away from the school building, still tilted. “Well, there certainly is still some good to being in a group. Look there.” He jerked his chin downwards, at a group of football club members on the ground. Practice had ended and now they were gathered in a half-circle around their advising teacher, in the middle of a meeting. Then there was the sound of clapping, as one tall student stood up and bowed deeply to the teacher and the team.

“Now!” cried Elnath. A sky-blue crystal darted out from the group below, and he caught it still upside-down with the use of only one hand. “Score again.”

“Hey, that's unfair! You were distracting me!”

“All's fair in love and war,” smirked Elnath. Now he took the crystal and, holding it up to the light of the sunset, squinted at it earnestly with one eye closed. “It's bigger than I thought it would be. I guess that that one boy was selected for something, while the rest who weren't had to give up their dreams of becoming professional players. Minato, you want this?”

The sky-blue crystal caught the light on its uneven surface and flared in the sunset.

Minato turned his head. “No, no thanks.”

“Hey, this isn't loser's charity or anything, you know? There's no need to hold back.”

‘No, it's not that. And I don't care what size it is either; I just don't want it.

Elnath turned to look directly at Minato. “Any reason why?”

Minato said, “I just don't get it, how they can let go of their potential crystals after just not being chosen. I mean, of course they'd be disappointed about it, maybe even get depressed over it, but if they really want to become a footballer there're still plenty of opportunities ahead. They just need to keep working at it. I'm no football expert, but I'm sure there're high schools they can join with strong football teams, or professional football team auditions that they can try out for, and plenty of other things besides. This isn't the only chance that they'll ever have. If they give up now then it's all over. There's more that they can do,

more that they can try, just—more, so long as they're still healthy...”

Elnath nodded. “I see.”

And now that he had finished with what he had to say, Minato slumped, drained and despondent. “That's what I would do, if I were them,” he said. “If I weren't sick, I... wouldn't give up.”

Elnath eyed Minato's bowled figure for a few moments. “Well, these things happen. Everyone's different,” he said lightly, dropping the potential crystal into his pouch with a clink. “Minato. Do you happen to know anything about an electron cloud's energy levels?”

Minato raised his eyes briefly, but lowered them again, shaking his head.

“Electrons occupy the space around the atomic nucleus in layers of shells,” said Elnath. “Quantum theory dictates that every shell can only hold up to a certain fixed number of electrons.” At this, Minato lifted his gaze, uncomprehending.

“Now, electrons normally exist in their ground state, meaning in a low energy shell. If, however, they gain energy from absorbing a photon, they jump up to a higher energy shell.”

“They jump?” interrupted Minato. He was caught up in the explanation now.

“Yup. They get excited by the photon's energy. The thing is, this change is fundamentally a temporary one, so after a while a photon will be released and the electrons will return to their normal energy levels. So even though you can make electrons reach incredible heights by shining light on them, they'll still sink back eventually.”

“Wait. So you're say...” Minato furrowed his brow. He began again. “So you're saying that potential crystals are like those photons? That they are literally the released manifestation of the people's dreams? So basically that those people down there never actually *had* the potential to become professional players in the first place?”

“Oh, no, no, our crystals aren't quite as simple as that,” said Elnath, “though you *are* welcome to think of them that way. At their ground state electrons can become excited by photons again. So you see, it's not all over even when you

lose the crystal. And that concludes my lesson.”

Minato understood now that Elnath had been trying to reassure him. To tell him that even if you did lose your dream, you could always become inspired by something new. But even so... Minato raised his eyes to the sky, looking to see if there was any of the crystal's blue in the colours of the sunset. But even so, he thought, he wouldn't have given up at all. Not if his body was fine. He looked up at Elnath, drifting ahead lazily. At his backpack, at the potential crystals within.

He took off. A kick at the air brought him to Elnath, and he reached out and grabbed a backpack strap as he flew by. Elnath cried out, “Hey, what're you doing?”

“Now – score one!” said Minato, after Elnath's fashion. “Both the crystals and Elnath are back in my hands!” He laughed, his laughter loud enough to banish any cares.

“You really are an uncivilised bunch, you earthlings!” cried Elnath, frantically waving his arms and legs in his newly-made harness. Minato bust into laughter again at the sight. Yes, why worry about the deep stuff? For once his body was fine, and he had a friend to play with, and there wasn't any more of a miracle that he could ask for. Why not just hunt for those shining crystals and have fun? Why not just put aside the true nature of the crystals or thoughts on how long this magic could last, for now at least, and simply enjoy the moment? So Minato danced on in the air, his coat billowing and with Elnath in tow.

And for a time, they passed their days in delight. They laughed with each other, argued with each other, chased around each other, ran afoul, sometimes, of cats with each other. The day that Fujiwara-san had said he could leave the hospital came and went, but Minato's spirits could no longer be dampened. He could he, when he had a friend to be with him?

At dinnertime once, Minato put aside the strawberry that came with the desert, and shared it later with Elnath. Tonkatsu would probably have been more of a treat, but, then again, they could hardly serve that in a hospital. Elnath took up the strawberry and held it before his eyes, entranced by its jewel-like redness. The strawberry then, together with a friend, was the best that he could ever remember tasting.

The girl was still staring wide-eyed at Minato in the air. He himself, back in the present again, blinked hard and squinted to see if she really *was* looking at him. She had her hands clasped at her front and her mouth a little open, looking for all the world as if she might begin sighing again for wonder. It was the first time Minato had ever been looked at with such awe. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes dancing. Surely this was precisely how girls looked when they met with their favourite idol.

He really was a prince at that moment then, one who was friends with a magician and could fly, the Little Prince.

There was a warm feeling spreading through his chest. All this time, he had been someone to be pitied, someone without anything to his name, but now here was a girl looking up to him and it was so embarrassing, but also so happy. Here she was, the first person to admire him for his own freedom!

The flash of awakening that he had felt when his and the girl's eyes had met, as well as the ease with which he dove into his memory after a trail to the present, were surely an outcome of the drifting, dreaming state that he had been in from the moment that he'd first put his princely coat on. And being observed by the girl had turned him, someone absolutely peripheral to the world, into a definite certainty. The great tree of the forest could now claim its existence in the world, for it had been seen by man.

“Elnath, someone's looking at us.”

His friend turned his head sharply back, then grinned. “No way.”

“No, look.” Minato turned to point at the door with the girl. But now the girl was being herded back into the house by her father, and although she was pointing up at them and evidently trying to convince him of their presence, he himself only smiled indulgently.

“You must have been seeing things,” said Elnath. “Both you are I are invisible to the rest of the world.”

“But—” Minato broke off, as the girl raised an arm to him and waved a

reluctant farewell.

But perhaps he wouldn't speak of this to Elnath. Wasn't Elnath fond of the idea of fate? Even their meeting was a fated one, according to him. If indeed the girl was able to see him....

He cried out his wish, then, his silent prayer. Because wouldn't it be nice if they could meet again, before the magic was gone?